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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - December 19, 2008

Atmospherics:

Media outlets continued to report extensively on the Russian MiG-29 donation to Lebanon. Many outlets reported on an interview that the Defense Minister gave to the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International TV station (LBCI) last night. El Murr said that "any country that will deal with Lebanon (about) military assistance will from now on have to deal with it from the level of the Russian donation upward," i.e., the Russians have set a new standard.

The media seemed to be confused about the U.S. position on the issue. Moderate anti-Syrian An-Nahar newspaper quoted an "American official who is briefed about the Lebanese file," as saying that the USG adopts "a neutral position" toward the Russian donation. Arab nationalist As-Safir said "the U.S. administration is very dissatisfied with, first, the Lebanese military and political course toward Russia, and second, with Russia's sudden decision." Several newspapers reported that Hizballah and the opposition were satisfied with the donation.

Selected Headlines

"Washington Is Neutral toward the MiG Jetfighters to Lebanon and El Murr Confirms That the Russian Donation Is Unconditional" Moderate anti-Syrian An-Nahar

"The Mig-29 Gift Will Be Followed By Choppers to Fight Fires" Centrist Al Anwar

Block Quotes:

"Political Roaring over the MiGs Precedes the Arrival of the Jetfighters: A Russian Landing (airlift) in Lebanon which Relieves the Opposition and Hizballah," an editorial by Imad Marmal in Arab nationalism As-Safir:

"Reactions to the 'Russian surprise' continue to echo strongly in Beirut, as though the roaring (sound) of the MiG-29s preceded the arrival of the ten jetfighters... While March 14 welcomed the donation...it was clear that there were those who intended to imply that the Russian donation embarrassed the opposition in general and Hizballah in particular because strengthening the LAF with developed weapons could take away from the 'Resistance' the reasons for continuing and the philosophy of its existence. Active leadership circles in the opposition...note that Hizballah could be in the lead of those who feel great relief over the Russian step, which is very important because Hizballah believes that it fell- in its strategic sense - into the category of strengthening the international presence that competes with the United States in the Middle East. As such, this step gains vital dimensions that bypass local details to touch on new balances that are being established in the region...

Information (from) highly informed sources in Beirut confirms that the Russian donation to the LAF is an expression of a strong political stand that was taken at the highest political levels in

Moscow and which calls for strengthening the Russian role in the Middle East in response to the American decision to build the missile shield in Europe... Hizballah and the opposition both look at the Russian donation as coinciding with a deep desire to strengthen any international presence on the Lebanese stage other than the American... The circles...reveal that Hizballah tends to be cautious about making a public welcoming ...so that the positive reaction does not affect military cooperation between Lebanon and Russia, especially since the Israelis are now watching such cooperation closely and could exploit any official Hizballah position to exercise pressure on Russia to close the door on arming the LAF under the banner that Hizballah is the beneficiary..."

"Arming the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) a Settlement or a Deal? An editorial by Ghada Halaweh in independent Al Balad:

"...As usual, politicians were divided between supporters and those who expressed reservations... We want the LAF to be armed and strong but we disagree over the source, even if the source this time is in the middle even if it is an ally of the Syrians and the Iranians. The Russian decision was a surprise without any doubt and no one can deny that the issue might include the word 'probable' international deal or bargain or some settlement...from which America or Israel are not distant... But if all that was untrue presumptions then we are facing a Russian challenge to America which until recently was refusing the issue of equipping the LAF in order for it not to become an extra scarecrow facing Israel. The nature of matters supposes that there is a price for equipping the LAF... and (it is evident in) the various messages that Russia has been sending in more than one direction. The first message is that Russia was not affected by the world financial crisis and that it has other sources to make up for any possible losses. Also, it is an opportunity for Russia at this transitional phase in America's history, to establish a presence in Lebanon and from there to the region in general..."

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